

Sports' Day

Of course, this was typical of our school. Event of the year, and what else could *that* be? Sports' Day.

I didn't even realise, back then, that I was dyspraxic. I mean, it was still the late 1980s. Dyslexia was recognised somewhat, but dyspraxia? Forget it. If you couldn't catch a ball, you were clumsy, end of. No one asked or cared why you were struggling. They were too busy laughing in your face, and calling you a "spastic", even though none of them understood the true meaning of that, much abused, term.

Anyway, whatever. Sports' Day shouldn't have affected me, as I was hardly likely to be participating. But every pupil at St. Andrew's Comp was obliged to join in "the fun", and to this end, we would have to carry our plastic chairs down the street and across the road, to the field by the running track. It belonged to the local sports' centre, I believe, but the school used it too, in addition to our regular playing field.

Daniel wasn't exactly into sports either, so he wouldn't be involved in any of the races - except to cheer on Isabella. But I was trying not to think too much about Daniel and Isabella. This day would be hard enough to get through, as it was.

"You *are* coming with us, Maud?" This from Jemma.

"Unless you're planning to hang around with Alison Brown and Louisa Clark, of course," added Charlene.

Yeah, because Jemma and Charlene had *always* been there for me, right? We, all three, knew that they were best friends with each other nowadays. I was the Third Wheel, and they only bothered with me when it suited them.

It was true enough that Alison and Louisa were trouble. But how many lunch breaks had I spent, waiting alone for the library to open, so that I could hide away in there? How many morning breaks had I spent walking in circles around the school, trying not to draw attention to my *on my own* status? Jem and Charlene hadn't cared then. They only wanted me now

because they didn't want me going around with Allie and Lou - and that was more about *not* liking them than *liking* me.

I often wished I could tell them all where to go and how to get there: Alison and Louisa, *and* Jemma and Charlene. One day, maybe, I would. But this was school in the real world, and friends were essential, even if they weren't the genuine variety. They were the difference between standing around alone, and blending in somewhat. Were a necessary aspect of day to day survival.

More than anything, I didn't want Daniel and his friends to laugh at me. That would hurt too much, and possibly, send me over the edge.

I thought about Daniel, with his wavy, dark brown hair, and those striking blue eyes. With the sense of humour that warmed my heart - except on those occasions when it had been myself, at whom he and his mates had been laughing. But that had been mainly John and Gareth, hadn't it? Or so I told myself.

"I'm not meeting Alison and Louisa," I said. "Of course I'm coming with you guys."

The first hour or so had been okay. At times, it had even been a laugh - like old times. Jemma, Charlene, and I had been real best friends for years, after all. We'd known each other since primary school. Both of my friends were in races, which had meant time with each of them, without the other. Which made things better for me.

It couldn't last though, could it? It was as Charlene was rejoining us, after the one hundred metre race, in which she'd come a close second, that we were also joined by Isabella, Dawn, and Janis.

"I'm so glad we caught you guys!" Dawn's high-pitched voice was practically a scream, as per usual. "You *are* coming to Jan's party on Saturday, right? It's seriously going to be the best!"

"Dawn, keep your voice down," warned Janis. "It *is* still supposed to be

somewhat exclusive, you know. We don't want *everyone* thinking they're invited." This with a definite, undeniable glare, in my direction.

"Of course it's going to be exclusive - only the best people. That goes without saying," said Dawn. "But Jem and Charlene *are* on the guest list, aren't they?"

"Naturally," said Janis. "Why wouldn't they be?"

"And yes, we're definitely coming," confirmed Jemma.

"We wouldn't miss it," added Charlene. "In fact, we were discussing outfits..."

I noticed that Isabella had apparently vanished.

Spun around to see the tall, slim, blonde, sitting with the guy I'd been in love with for over two years. They were all over each other - and that hurt more than any bitchy comment made by Bella's friends.

Daniel Harrison and Isabella Ross. The perfect couple. I honestly couldn't take much more.

I wandered off on my own, and that, predictably, was when Alison and Louisa appeared.

"Hey, Maud - we were beginning to think you were avoiding us!" said Alison.

"Of course not. Why would I be avoiding you?"

"We thought you'd ditched us for Jemma Smith and Charlene Jackson again," said Louisa. "You were sitting with them, when we saw you."

"Yeah, well - never mind that," said Alison. "Wait until you see what we've got. You'll be happy enough to hang around with us then, believe me." She glanced around her. "Show her what's in your bag, Lou."

"What if someone sees?" whined Louisa.

"Not a teacher in sight," Alison assured her. "They're all too bothered about the poxy races."

Louisa duly opened her navy-blue schoolbag. Along with the usual exercise books, textbooks, and stationery were five cans of hairspray - and, since this was Allie and Lou, as opposed to Jemma and Charlene, or Bella and her clique - well, let's just say, valuable hairspray wasn't liable to be wasted, simply by being sprayed on to someone's hair. I noticed that Lou also had my personal favourite: a can of air freshener.

"But we can't - you know, here," I said. "They caught Christine and her gang smoking in the toilets, and they're watching everyone who goes anywhere near - monitoring how long they take."

"Yeah, well - sniffing in the toilets is kind of obvious, anyway," said Alison. "The best way is just to do it right here. As long as we're at the back, and we don't make it too obvious - honestly, everyone's watching the races, guys. They won't even notice."

"Won't even notice? What, if we start inhaling aerosol cans, right here, in front of everyone?" said Louisa. "You've lost it, Allie."

Louisa was right. There was no way we'd get away with that.

But then, I caught sight of Daniel and Bella, and I didn't even care any more. I grabbed the can of air freshener, along with a towel, which I'd also need.

My thoughts were racing. But, as the world dissolved into a too-familiar, hazy blur, none of it mattered any more. Nothing mattered. Nothing.

And there it was, in my mind - the idea that I might never stop. That I might keep going, and going, until...

Try - until the deputy head, Miss Rollins, caught me.

Even Alison and Louisa didn't seem to know what had hit them. How everything had escalated, at such a rapid pace.

I witnessed the various looks of contempt, disdain, horror, and pity on

the faces of my classmates, as the teacher marched me back to school. Heard the distant buzz of their whispered conversations.

Straight the headmaster's office. They were going to contact my parents, of course.

Daniel had looked at me as if I was something he wouldn't want to tread in. And his precious girlfriend had obviously been trying not to laugh. Dawn and Janis actually *had* giggled.

As had Jem and Charlene. Some "friends".

Sports' Day. Fun, right? Welcome to St. Andrew's Comprehensive.